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Racial Foster Care, Contraceptive Knowledge and Adoption in Alain Locke's Philosophy of Culture

Abstract:

This article confronts the problems of establishing normative restrictive claims for delegitimizing conduct and attitudes of cultural appropriation. Using C. Thi Nguyen's and Matthew Strhol's intimacy account (IA) as a background, I offer an alternative of *cultural adoption* relying upon Alain Locke's value theory and philosophical pluralism. The phenomenon of cultural adoption I propose develops some insights from Nguyen's and Strohl's IA, while critiquing their framework's perceived limitations. By adding loyalty and intensity to the prerogatives of intimacy, the hope is that a more nuanced approach to the ethical concerns of cultural adoption will be achieved. My contention is that Locke's notions of a racial sense or kinship feeling provides stronger grounds for establishing an ethics of the passerby or what I will call non-intimate encounters. Next, I will argue that the interpersonal relations of groups cannot be interpreted as simple, but only as complex wholes. Instead of monoliths and exclusive binaries, we have to recognize variation within groups and learn to think in what Albert Murray calls "mulatto," or a culture of novel hybrids. In the final section, I argue that Locke's philosophy, broadly construed, operates as a contraceptive knowledge against the growing imperial apathy of populists and absolutists. We should work to abandon forms of political and epistemological violence by rejecting these forms of cultural abuse. It is my grand contention that human groups express in their differences a uniqueness that makes us distrust or admire and like each other.

Keywords:

intimacy account, intercultural reciprocity, cultural adoption, kinship of feeling, cultural ethics

“The culture is inbred – but we ourselves are its parents.”

Alain LeRoy Locke

Introduction: Who is the Real Alain Locke?

Alain Locke was a complex African American cultural icon and philosopher. On the one hand, he was a key figure responsible for the Harlem Renaissance and inspiring movements of minority uplift. On the other, Locke was the first Black Rhodes Scholar (there would not be another for 60 years) and first Harvard philosophy PhD graduate known for harboring elitist attitudes akin to being a racial “uppity.” How are we to reconcile these conflicting dispositions in studying Locke’s philosophy of culture? Given these seemingly hypocritical attitudes, how did he think about the important ethical issues around justifying cultural assimilation and appropriation? If we take our social terrains to be full of what Jean Baudrillard called “simulations”¹ involving so much uprootedness and a crisis of belonging, Locke is an important philosopher to consult. Similar to his own epoch, we face troublesome, uncertain, and desperate times. Yet, Locke makes philosophical attempts to rise above persistent sociopolitical turmoil and offer a newfound confidence in a fresh vision of what he calls the New Negro. “New” is the key term. Our goal is to avoid interpreting Locke (or any thinker for that matter) ideologically. As a foremost authority on Locke, philosopher Leonard Harris remarks, “Locke was not an assimilationist, separatist, instinctivist, or nativist. That group identities are without a rational basis in the sense that they parallel or reflect or manifest a hidden nature or universal essence does not warrant, for Locke, an inference that they are irrelevant or unimportant features of personhood nor that they are subject to dissipate in a foreseeable future.”² In other words, Locke’s approach does not dismiss identity politics, but tempers them with more respect and openness for a plurality of identities and normative possibilities in hopes of raising the thresholds of personal and communal tolerance. In doing so, he offers a kind of contraceptive knowledge against assimilative and appropriative concrete practices of monocultural privilege. Races or racial distinctions have become so exponential and differentiated throughout our global ethnoscape, who can deny the need for moral or careful adoption and foster care of these identities, values, and histories? Dare I say, the complexities of racial relations have moved even beyond the ironic or explainable, into the monstrous.³ Who is able to confront this immensity of the global ethnoscape? Without getting bogged down in *us versus them* and other antagonisms, who is ready to respect the way in which cultural hybrids openly and persuasively pervade all of our cultures? But I will argue that a full-blown cosmopolitanism is impossible and scholars have been wrong to criticize Locke for being a “moderate cosmopolitan.” Locke’s philosophy is too pluralistic and transdisciplinary to be captured under broad or general labels, such as “cosmopolitan” or “critical pragmatist.” In fact, I will argue that despite Locke’s own use of terms like “assimilation,” “appropriation,” and “acculturation,” we can retrieve the real thrust of Locke’s insights once we understand his philosophy of culture and value ethics as one of adoption. Indeed, Locke is at his best, in many respects, when he stresses the importance of cultural adoption. I argue that Locke’s dynamic conception of value as a cultural glue or fixture accepts *intrinsic* and *instrumental* value to be co-equal *only in practice*, while this co-equality cannot be permissible conceptually, or abstractly. This is a subtle distinction because Locke refuses to draw a sharp divide between theoretical and practical wisdom. One needed if we are to think outside of black and white

1) “Culture is now dominated by simulations, Baudrillard contends, objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground, no foundation.” Poster, “Introduction,” 1.

2) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 20.

3) Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, 630.

boxes and move into a prism of colors which respects the subtle distinction of thought and action. Such is the essence of contraceptive knowledge, working as an immunity against impregnated absolutisms and dogmatic exceptionalisms.

Cultures not only take new and unexpected turns, but we are bound to shock ourselves with what becomes of our pluralistic adoptions. Locke is adamant that “this type of value pluralism does not invite the chaos of value-anarchy or the complete *laissez faire* of extreme value individualism. It rejects equally trying to reduce value distinctions to the flat continuum of a pleasure-pain economy [utilitarianism] or to a pragmatic instrumentalism of ends-means relations.”⁴ For this reason, offering a ready-made version of Locke as multi-cultural, progressive, or – to put it bluntly – crucially pragmatic, all have a grain of truth to them. And yet, one is left feeling empty or like something is missing with such placeholders. I will argue that Locke’s philosophy of culture and value theory anticipates several of the defining trends currently playing out in political, racial, and economic relations. By putting less stress on inheritance and ownership and instead emphasizing “kinship” (“race sense”), Locke positions himself away from the enlightenment philosophies of natural right. Instead of being driven by a logic of acquisition and inheritance, which serves to justify appropriation and assimilation claims, “kinship groups” allow us to avoid falling prey to genealogical trappings. Locke’s thought exposes how modernity promotes a progressivism committed to the limits of resemblance. Cultural identities and values will undergo dynamic changes reflected in shifting rituals and institutional arrangements. What resembles the past will become more obsolete under the craze of neo-mania. Neo-mania is an obsession with novelty, for its own sake. To paraphrase philosopher Byung-Chul Han, things are aging without getting old.⁵ Locke’s cultural orientation articulates an openness to hybrid adoption while critiquing the authoritative values underlying the tenets of appropriation breaches.

While arguing for their intimacy account (IA), C Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl write, “we propose that there is a type of relation that exists at the scale of large groups that is *analogous* to intimacy among couples or within families.”⁶ I would like to develop some insights from Nguyen’s and Strohl’s IA through a Lockean lens of cultural adoption. First, Locke’s naturalized axiology expands on the importance of intimacy by considering the values of *loyalty* and *intensity*. Including these qualities introduces potentially fruitful analysis to our understanding of intimacy. Further, my contention is that Locke’s notion of racial sense (or “kinship feeling”), provides stronger grounds for establishing an ethics of the passerby or what I call non-intimate encounters. Next, I will argue that the interpersonal relations of groups cannot be interpreted as simple, but only as complex wholes. Instead of monoliths and exclusive binaries, we have to recognize variation within groups and learn to think in what Albert Murray calls “mulatto,” or a culture of novel hybrids. In the final section, I argue that Locke’s philosophy, broadly construed, operates as a contraceptive knowledge against the growing imperial apathy of populists and absolutists. We should work to abandon forms of political and epistemological violence by rejecting various forms of cultural abuse. Adoption works to overcome non-sympathetic narratives by facilitating a co-feeling with others without pretensions to superior standing or knowledge.⁷

4) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*. See especially “Values and Imperatives,” 47.

5) Han, *The Scent of Time*, vii. Nothing is wrong with your smartphone, but you will be pressured to get the latest version and leave your perfectly fine model behind.

6) Nguyen and Strohl, “Cultural Appropriation and Intimacy,” 989; emphasis original.

7) For more on that see Jackson, “On the Power of Cultural Adoption.”

Locke's Cultural Adoption and Functional Theory of Value

In their article "Cultural Appropriation and the Intimacy of Groups," Nguyen and Strohl argue for interpersonal intimacy as the chief criteria for morally evaluating the legitimacy of "appropriation claims."⁸ I agree with the authors when they claim that ignoring an appropriation claim would constitute a breach of intimacy and a moral obligation. But the category of "intimacy" seems to be vague and misleading. Ambiguous at best. After all, I can be intimate with those out-groups I fiercely oppose or actively seek to undermine. Much of what the authors propose is conducive with a philosophy of cultural adoption. They write: "We propose that there is a type of relation that exists at the scale of large groups that is *analogous* to intimacy among couples or within families. Group intimacy does not entail that the members of the groups all know each other or spend time around each other. Rather, it entails that the group is bound together by common practices that ground a sense of unity among the members of the groups."⁹

Patriotism, in responsible measure, stems more from kinship of feeling than any essentialist identities, such as nationality or ethnicity. Locke describes this regarding the American national character and temperament:

One can account for the presence of this corporate feeling in closely knit and socially compact groups, or in the country where one racial stock or predominant institution supplies a coercive feeling of kinship unity. But in America, a land of startling divergencies and instinctive antipathies, it is difficult to explain. Neither as a carelessness or indifference to these contrasts, nor as democratic tolerance, nor even as theoretical or practical humanitarianism, can one account for the American sense of fellowship.¹⁰

The potentiality for morally justifiable cultural exchanges is expressed in Locke's sense of "intercultural reciprocity," and he finds the broadest expression of this in American culture. Such a doctrine relies upon an assumption of mutual relatedness in shared feelings. Cultures, like races and ethnicities, have the capacity to *feel each other* as a concrete basis for further relations. Feelings bind us to a common humanity with analogous values, practices, and rituals. Locke rejects emotivism and any other form of psychological reductionism. Further, no values may be fixed permanently: "only in our traditional stereotyping of values is this so: in actuality, something in the way they are felt or apprehended establishes their normative relevance."¹¹ I take Locke's interpretation of culture to be organic and parallel with Henri Bergson's open society rooted in "being openhearted."¹² Locke's notion of reciprocity seeks to avoid the exploitative aspects of cultural appropriation while promoting what may be mutually advantageous to all cultures involved – demonstrating a "kinship warmly reciprocated." How we adopt and take up relations with other races should be guided by the moral concerns of what I call racial foster care and closely aligns with Locke's "kinship warmly reciprocated."

8) The authors define appropriation claims as "a request from a group member that non-members refrain from appropriating a given element of the group's culture." See Nguyen and Strohl, "Cultural Appropriation and Intimacy," 981.

9) Ibid., 989; emphasis original.

10) Locke, "Value and Culture," 432.

11) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*. See especially "A Functional View of Value," 84.

12) Philosopher Dorothy Emmet details three types of societies that can be deemed as open: 1) having freedom of entry (Max Weber); 2) having open-mindedness (Karl Popper); and, 3) being openhearted (Henri Bergson). See Emmet, "The Concept of Freedom."

Values are corroborated by feelings, as Locke said, and, by taking feeling into account, we can see how values function. . . . Reciprocity, grounded not only in empathy but in the porousness of feeling and value modes, becomes one of the cornerstones of Locke's philosophy . . . Since we ourselves can and do shift from one value mode to another and experience a range of feelings with each mode and each shift, we should be able to apply this realization to the conflict between groups.¹³

I argue that Locke's philosophy of value acts as a contraceptive against the indoctrination of authoritative values, which he viewed as a constant threat to democracy and respect for cultural pluralism. He begins by recognizing the tension between our "values" – feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences – and "imperatives" which act as authoritative guides.¹⁴

The danger of "authoritativeness" involves the *closed* manner with which they value and take up value perspectives – value stances become absolutist or anti-pluralist. If one upholds absolute values, the only reason given for learning the values of other groups is solely for the purpose of proving them wrong. Absolutists, or those who subscribe to authoritative values, practice cultural *absolutism*. They surmise no real advantages from cross-cultural exchanges or downplay the external influences on their own cultural outfits. Furthermore, they insist upon dominant narratives and interpretations monopolizing cultural meaning and downplaying any alternatives. Absolutists commit to values infallibly, which is to say uncritically and with imperial apathy. In the next section, I will address how this encourages the limitations of black and white, binary thinking and how we need to recognize that we often act and think in a mulatto-like multi-coloredness or along gray-zones. Locke leans in the direction of accepting that it is healthy for groups and individuals alike to entertain a number of interpretations of one's culture for learning purposes, in the least. Individuals will have to negotiate within group allegiances which values they choose to espouse, reject, or remain indifferent. Groups will have mixtures of those who seek openness and tolerance to authoritative types – those who are more permissive and less restrictive. When it comes to our cultural makeup, we take passive and active orientations on various issues, depending on the circumstances and our preference at that time. There is a strong difference between "acceptance" and "affirming." To affirm is deemed as more proactive and allows for a wider moral prerogative since it is presumed that one has more skin in the game. Accepting an outsider does not rise to the same threshold. One also must take into account the scales of loyalty that cultural actors will adopt. There are *passive* and *active* frequencies of loyalty both across and within groups, which is often left to the discretion of personal dispositions and attitudes. For example, one can be a devout Muslim or Jew in a steadfast way, such that it monopolizes one's identity. But at the opposite end of the spectrum, we encounter the fair-weather follower, or the *a la carte* Muslim and Jew engaging in the traditions and ceremonies loosely, without a sense of deeper meaning or attachment. This is not an intense form of belonging. In our current epoch of uprootedness and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity," the latter form of association grows more attractive. The individual presumes to want or have more of a say over the influence of one's inheritances. Our power to adopt has and will generate more confused and combined identities. It is my contention that Locke's philosophy holds many of the key ingredients that we are truly in a position to not only articulate, but to appreciate.

As Locke indicated, "in the large majority of cases the culture is only to be explained as the resultant of the meeting and reciprocal influence of several culture strains, several ethnic contributions."¹⁵ Calling to mind

13) Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 290.

14) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 31–33.

15) Locke, *Works*, 274.

such greats as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, Locke writes: “African sculpture has been for contemporary European painting and sculpture just such a mine of fresh *motifs*, just such a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression, and surely, once known and appreciated, this art can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants, bound to it by a sense of direct cultural kinship, than upon those who inherit by tradition only, and through the channels of an exotic curiosity and interest.”¹⁶ Likewise, those leading the Harlem Renaissance like Langston Hughes, Jesse Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, or William Grant Still, who worked closely with Locke to put on the performance of *Sahdji*, fully appreciated and practiced the sense of cultural adoption in the movement of articulating the doctrine and style of the New Negro. Locke would go on to formulate in *When Peoples Meet*, his sense of “intercultural reciprocity” with the progressive attitude employed in *The New Negro*. “Intercultural reciprocity relies on the anthropological notion of cultural contact, but it goes far beyond it in putting values – rather than, say customs or rituals – at the center of such contact.”¹⁷

As Greg Moses argues, by associating values with feelings Locke formulates “a functional analysis of value norms and a search for normative principles in immediate context of valuation.”¹⁸ Moses goes on to state that Lockean values can rightly be understood as “continuous with the freedoms of William James’s ‘will to believe,’ not unconnected to Jamesian radical empiricism.”¹⁹ I am reading Locke through the lens of radical empiricism, which is to say, the goal is to have and read the experience and let one’s metaphysics develop out of the experience rather than the other way around. Contemporary identities can afford to be entertained in *loose* and vague or novel ways. We are more likely to “play” with these modes of association than to understand ourselves to be at their mercy. Advocates of authoritative values are less likely to be open to personal discretion when it comes to how we adopt or reject identities. Under the auspices of appropriation and acculturation, there is a presumption that we do not have the agency to negotiate or even choose our heritages. They are handed down from on high and we must live with the unintended consequences of accepting such identities as a matter of one’s fate or destiny. In this sense, identities, cultural rituals, and values are only allowed to be practiced under *strict* and specific conditions and scrutiny. They are only seen to serve in an authoritative matter, regardless of whether or not “a kinship feeling of interest” has been established.²⁰

In his doctrine of values as being adoptable,

Locke concludes by imagining a religion, a morality, an art, and a philosophy that would all be able to see that values were forms of feeling, but this did not mean values were phantasms or self-indulgences. Rather, they formed a set of truths that could be changed, tested by experience, and made into a method of corroborating ourselves and the allegiances that lie behind our common humanity. Locke’s philosophy and his experience as a black man in the first third of the twentieth century were co-assertive, so to speak. As with his notion of the “civilization type” in the lectures on race contracts, Locke structured his analysis so as to end with an idealized formulation, but one that kept clear the direction of rigorous thought and did not lose itself in the clouds of wishful thinking.²¹

16) *Ibid.*, 189.

17) Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 341–42.

18) Moses, “A Compass for Valuation,” 404; and Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Lock*. See especially “Values and Imperatives,” 36.

19) Moses, “A Compass for Valuation,” 406.

20) Wright, “Alain Locke on Race Relations,” 685.

21) Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 291–92.

Stable and fixed categories are not only illusory, for Locke, but they are dangerous because they can lead to forms of absolutism, or logics of domination. Instead, any of our categories should be fluid and elastic enough to contend with the “varieties” (James’ term) of human cultural experiences and conditions. Many philosophers of culture have failed to appreciate the importance of Locke’s philosophy of values being radically empirical and pluralistic. In a post-deconstructionist age, we live in a kind of metaphysical mist rendering us unable to hold long-ranging views about the nature of reality and other trans-historical concerns.

Have You Ever Thought in Mulatto Yet?

“American culture, even in its most segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto.”²² In his important, but seldom read book *Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*, Albert Murray argues that mulatto best captures and reflects multicolored American culture. America’s cultural pantheon is vast regarding its intermixed shadings and meanings. Such “soft power” is how America still holds super-power status in the world as its hard power can be heard clanging, wobbling, and falling. I find it frustrating how much Americans get locked into the binary of black-and-white thinking. How perplexing for a world leader in multi-coloredness?²³ I will never forget the first time it occurred for me to ask: was the most photographed human being of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass, a Black man? No, he was of mixed race, like me. I discovered this was the case with the great educator Booker T. Washington. What about President Barak Obama? Same thing. What about America’s great golfer Tiger Woods? Yet, we have not been told or compelled to appreciate the ways in which mulattos of so many complexions – the vaguely *beige* people of the world – constitute so much of the American demographic, and will continue well into the future. I concur with Murray’s judgment that America is more mulatto than black and white. When one hears of the virtues of colorblindness, one of the immediate responses should be something like “why?” Is it not the polychromatic makeup of everyone and everything that makes a world so rich and abundant? What would we be able to make of a world that comes only in blacks, grays, and whites? From Locke’s philosophy, we can appreciate the richly complex ways being American can manifest itself and how this corresponds with what Albert Murray argues in his book *Omni-Americans*.

In his most recent book *Wer noch kein Grau gedacht hat (Have You Ever Thought in Gray?)*, Peter Sloterdijk argues that gray-tones best work for understanding the politics and cultural atmospheres of our age. Black and white opposites do not capture the complexities and ironic relations that makes up our dialogue and ambiguity or vagueness of meaning. To put it in the words of French philosopher Henri Bergson, “I shall never imagine how black and white intermingle if I have not seen grey, but I have no difficulty in understanding, once I have seen grey, how one can envisage it from the double viewpoints of black and white.”²⁴ Indeed, philosophy, too, moves in the gray-zones of thought and understanding, from Plato’s shadows on the cave walls to Hegel’s notion of the Owl of Minerva flying only at dusk. The tint of Heidegger’s moodedness of Dasein’s being-thrown in the world (*Geworfenheit*) is just as gray. Sloterdijk asserts that “gray is the color of compromise *a priori*.” We can agree with him regarding the compromise, but gray can be dull and drab. What Sloterdijk wanted to get at we can hear in the following tenor: have we ever thought in mulatto yet?

22) Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 23; emphasis original.

23) I am thinking of the common metaphors capturing the richness of the American dream: melting pot, multiculturalism, or smorgasbord.

24) Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 198.

As Lee McBride argues in his insightful chapter “Culture, Acquisitiveness, and Decolonial Philosophy,” “it is historically erroneous and conceptually wrongheaded to see cultural products as things proprietarily owned by one racial or ethnic group.”²⁵ In other words, cultures are more hybrids encompassing “nascent” presencings, which brings on the importance of questioning moral issues regarding how cultures are fostered and adopted, in legitimate and illegitimate ways. Ownership is the language of assimilationists and those obsessed with policing cultural appropriations, who falsely pretend not to be involved in projects of absolutist and authoritarian values. McBride writes further, “As Alain Locke suggests, all modern cultural products bear the mark of some other cultural influence. All modern cultural products are composite. They are amalgams, products of intercultural exchange and cultural reciprocity.”²⁶ What Locke and Du Bois found so potent in the Negro Spirituals, aside from them expressing the inner life of a people, is how they ground identity: “identity is grounded – and this is crucial – not in opposition to another group, in this case a dominant group that subjugates as a matter of its own identity.”²⁷ Identity can and has been weaponized in these ways. Here we can see “what tradition means in this context, simultaneously linking and delinking race and culture.”²⁸ If we are the parents or authors of culture the question becomes, do we possess and own cultures? Not anymore than we would be willing to admit to owning our biological children. This kind of claim to possession would be dehumanizing and not oriented toward the endearment of care one owes in relations of such intimate exchange and mutual respect. That is why the term “borrowing” is misleading and, ultimately, works on behalf of those cultural heritages bent on ownership, entitlement, and overall policing of rituals, symbolic meanings, and moral norms pertaining to how we implement or live out such associations. In his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote “feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.”²⁹ Cultural repositories are already products of hybrids and the intermixing of traditions, practices, and social customs. The notion that cultural meanings are “pure” or untouched by outsiders is illusory and deliberately misleading. In this way does the kinship feeling undergo an enlarging of the heart.

Locke denies that values are intrinsic and attempts “to characterize value norms as system values rather than fixed intrinsic values, as *process* imperatives rather than intrinsic absolutes.”³⁰ “Culture is [only] fixed, in that all values are first inherited by each individual, and yet fluid, in that people change and let go of certain values as they mature. Thus, individuals receive their basic language of values from their culture, but individuals are capable of modifying their culture’s axiological lexicon over time. Locke defines culture widely, ranging from manners and conversation to applied science and the fine arts.”³¹ As presented in the previous section, a philosophy of cultural adoption subscribes to a relationist and functionalist metaphysics of value. This approach to value is consistent with Locke’s overall view toward philosophy: “all philosophies, it seems to me, are in ultimate derivation philosophies of life and not of abstract, disembodied ‘objective’ reality; products of time, place and situation, and thus systems of timed history rather than timeless eternity.”³² A politics of eternity is incompatible with democratic norms and values. A pluralistic philosophy of culture based on a nonreduc-

25) McBride, “Culture, Acquisitiveness, and Decolonial Philosophy,” 17.

26) *Ibid.*, 27.

27) Drabinski, “Decolonizing the West,” 74.

28) *Ibid.*

29) Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 276.

30) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*. See especially “A Functional View of Value Ultimates,” 85; emphasis added.

31) MacMullan, “Challenges to Cultural Diversity,” 132. See Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, especially “The Ethics of Culture,” 181.

32) Locke, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, especially “Values and Imperatives,” 34.

tive, subtle account of valuation offers a better guide for liberal democracy. Given the need and importance for recognizing the reality of cultural hybrids and mixtures, it is fitting to read when Locke writes: “What is ‘racial’ for the American Negro resides merely in the overtones to certain fundamental elements of culture *common to white and black* and his by adoption... . What is distinctively Negro in culture usually passes over by rapid osmosis to the general culture, and often as in the case of Negro folklore and folk music and jazz becomes nationally current and representative.”³³ Locke was a philosopher of culture who argued against the logics of domination articulated through various models and theories of assimilation and appropriation, and became a pluralistic multicultural integrationist. At least, these are the general labels one will find his philosophy labeled under whether rightly or wrongly, unfairly or fairly. “The integrity of each culture, cultural interaction, and freely chosen forms of association were preferred over forced Americanization and forced assimilation.”³⁴

Fostering Racial Identities through Cultural Adoption

Locke argues that ethnic groups “have neither purity of blood nor purity of type; they are the products of countless intermingling of types.” Rather, they are predicated on kinship relations. How can we achieve cultural exchange between different peoples and cultures? Confronting this question was arguably Locke’s central philosophical concern. Locke is clear how “we must consider race not in the fascist, blood-clan sense, which also is tribal and fetishist, but consider race as a common culture and brotherhood. Cultural superiority of one race is only an expression of arbitrary loyalty to that which is our own. Confraternity of culture will have to be put forward as what race can mean, and as an ideal of the parity of races and cultures.”³⁵ It is the “confraternity of culture” which makes up Locke’s focus on race sense and what I am calling racial foster care.³⁶ Racial foster care seeks to establish forms of epistemic contraception against intellectual and social imperialism, which aim to function as cultural absolutes and represent a base-line of closedness at the heart of extreme or strict assimilation and appropriation. Each of us is capable of mixing our experiences into any “pure” or unmixed conception of one’s race or identity, which does not match the way that the sculpture and portrait of the artist would sketch out. There is no reason to take this account as anything other than a caricature of one’s true, concrete existence. Identities are not static nor set in stone, since they are perpetually negotiated and become a source of reference *pragmatically*, or according to each occasion.

One of the attractive things about Locke’s approach to racial relations, specifically the plight of African Americans, involves downplaying how we should regulate and police cultures. In his remarkable book *Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, Kwame Appiah asks the fundamental question: how do cultures come into the making and do they constitute any overarching essence that we can call “Canadian,” or “Chinese” in a similar way we talk about animal species? He argues we cannot afford to interpret cultures statically, and considers the character of *Englishness*:

What was England like in the days of Chaucer, “father of English literature,” who died more than six hundred years ago? Take whatever you think was distinctive of it, whatever combination of customs, ideas, and material things that made England characteristically English then. Whatever you choose to distinguish Englishness now, it isn’t going to be *that*. Rather, as time rolls on, each

33) Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” 452; emphasis original.

34) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 15.

35) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*; especially “Moral Imperatives for World Order,” 151–52.

36) Carter, “Between Reconstruction and Elimination,” 200–201.

generation inherits the label from an earlier one; and, in each generation, the label comes with a legacy. But as the legacies are lost or exchanged for other treasures, the label keeps moving on. And so, when some of those in one generation move elsewhere from the territory to which English identity was once tied – move, for example, to a *New England* – the label can even travel beyond the territory. Identities can be held together by narratives, in short, without essences: you don't get to be called "English" because there's an essence this label follows; you're English because our rules determine that you are entitled to the label – that you are connected in the right way with the place called England.³⁷

Narratives, not essences, hold together identities, making them more malleable and better understood as episodes in the making rather than stories already made. "How else could one begin to make sense of the fact that the varieties of black cultural identity present in Britain today, whose genealogy I traced at the start of this lecture, are simultaneously the site of continuing marginalization and exclusion, being the objects of material and symbolic practices of racialized oppression, *and also* the signifiers of a new kind of ethnized modernity, close to the cutting edge of a new iconography and a new semiotics that are redefining 'the modern' itself?"³⁸

As Judith Green and Ken Stickers have written, it is shortsighted to read Locke as merely extending of the pluralism of James and Dewey. "Cultivated pluralism" in Locke's sense has more to teach democracy than a pluralism which is merely "assumed." As we are learning more each day, democracy has to be earned and sustained not by high ideals, but by working within and outside of kinship groups, competing and negotiating with competing interests. Stickers ascertains

Locke's cultivated pluralism, by contrast to Dewey's assumed pluralism, thus serves several important functions for democracy [and culture]. First, it helps to ensure that an individual's or group's adoption of another's views, values, or norms is the result of free, deliberative judgment and not of coercion. Second, the intentional sustaining of differences brings into sharper awareness the social character of individual thought. The individual becomes increasingly aware that his or her beliefs have emerged for a definite sociocultural context and hence are strongly shaped by his or her membership in a particular social group – one's socialized opinions cease to be self-evident truths. A critical space is thus created wherein individuals can reflect upon, and better judge the soundness of, their inherited beliefs. Third, cultivated pluralism enhances global culture's ability to respond to new problematic situations by preserving hypotheses that may prove useful in those situations but that may be discarded prematurely if convergence of beliefs comes too quickly. Dewey argued eloquently and forcefully in several places, to be sure, for the need for cultural groups to preserve elements of their heritages. But his statements in this regard appear, within his corpus as a whole, as corrective afterthoughts. The cultivation of cultural pluralism stems more, for Dewey, from the need of cultures to be tolerant of, and to learn from, one another and hence is not as central to his democratic vision as it is to Locke's.³⁹

37) Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*, 199; emphasis original.

38) Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, 123–24; emphasis original.

39) Stickers, "Instrumental Relativism and Cultivated Pluralism," 214. See, for example, Green, "Alain Locke's Multicultural Philosophy," 87–89.

Locke's philosophy of culture provides tools and defenses of contraceptive knowledge, or the ability to resist indoctrination by absolutism, ideological fanaticisms, and imperial apathy. His conception of pluralism, in the robust sense, entails a constant effort to renovate and sponsor one's adopted and preferred values, but never at the expense or detriment of others. It is also just as much the case that these values and practices can choose or adopt you. Through exposure and different forms of affiliations, the possibility presents itself that what are considered to be "out group" influences can nevertheless be taken in as a part of one's identity or cultural outfit. It might be associated with one's "calling." Locke's axiological pluralism promotes a cultural adoption along these lines while rejecting the ability to embrace all cultures or every nation as unrealistic. For "viewed from any point in our lifeworld, the vast majority of individuals, languages, works of art, commodities and galaxies remain an unassimilable outside world, by necessity and forever."⁴⁰ Compared with absolutists or proponents of cultural imperialism, cultural relativism moves in the opposite direction and feels just as unsatisfying. Not only can no one embrace or appropriate all of the world's cultures, but it is naïve to believe that people find it desirable to do so. There are foods, styles of dress, and song, or different games and sports I find to be unseasonable and non-attractive. I bet you do too – there are no forms of openness without closedness. One need not be *intolerant* to recognize the ways in which we feel our ways in and out of cultural rituals, practices, and norms or values. Instead, the objective is to be sensitive and open to any potential culture one encounters or is influenced by. In his analysis of Locke's little-read philosophical study "Pluralism and Ideological Peace," H. M. Kallen describes brilliantly the unique conception of Locke's axiological sense of adoption, without using that specific term:

The import of Unity is liquidation of difference and diversity, either by way of an identification of the different, or by way of a subordination and subjection to the point where *it makes no difference*. *Per contra*, the import of Union is the team-play of the different. Union resides in the *uncoerced, the voluntary commitment of the different to one another in free cooperation*; and ideological peace, as Locke had expounded it in this essay, is a conception denoting fundamentally this free intercommunication of diversities – denoting the cultivation of those diversities for the purpose of free and fruitful intercommunication between equals.⁴¹

By providing moral insight, there is a responsible way that other groups can discuss and interrogate groups with whom they do not share strong proximity. "Politics is not conducted in a liberal and democratic state but in and among kinship groups."⁴²

One weakness of Locke's approach is its lack of clarity on how kinship groups should proceed. His philosophy of culture does not give directions. "Nowhere did Locke explicitly state what the criterion should be or how assessments and comparisons can ever be made. Locke led us to the foot of the mountain, but refused to give us the rope to make it to the top."⁴³ When it comes to our levels of cultural tolerance there is a sliding scale between the totally permissive and restrictive. Total prohibition would be giving the Nazi salute in Germany, whereas a red-light district like the one in Amsterdam allows for exceptions and flexibility. Normative restrictions and justifications can be legitimated along these grounds. Many groups will exhibit patterns of behavior favoring looser or tighter norms and tendencies. The tighter and more strict/rigid relations will move in the

40) Green, "Alain Locke's Multicultural Philosophy," 76.

41) Kallen, "Locke and Cultural Pluralism," 123–24; emphasis added.

42) Wright, "Alain Locke on Race Relations," 685.

43) Dennis, "Relativism and Pluralism in the Social Thought of Alain Locke," 39.

direction of border patrol, policing cultural exchanges. “Complete absorption and wholesale adoption not impossible, and perhaps not infrequent, though it must always seem the exception for historical reasons.”⁴⁴ Assimilation and appropriation are grounded in the necessity of “borders” or what Cameroonian political philosopher Achille Mbembe calls the “dead spaces of non-connection.” Mbembe argues that “borderization” captures the current cultural milieu better than borders in the sense of the traditional nation-state. Adoption articulates a new register of feelings for cultural solidarity and loyalty beyond borderization.⁴⁵ Borderization acts as an inhibitor within the current cultural ethnoscape. In Locke’s sense, it detracts from a cultural pluralism seeking to foster a richer, more colorful racial sense.⁴⁶ The world is connected digitally and electronically, but the legal and political realms still lag behind this recent development. Our “leaders” have been some of the last to recognize how we are adopting “thin-walled” ways of life and that “we are entering an age in which weak borders and porous shells become the distinguishing feature of social systems.”⁴⁷ The porous movements of persons, places, and things makes the problem of borders ambiguous and problematic. As Nguyen and Strohl argue – using the example of a biker poser – “we think that intimate groups should have the prerogative to set their own boundaries, but this creates a circularity: in order to set the boundaries of a group, the group members need to arrive at a decision; but in order to identify which people have legitimate standing to participate in this decision, we need to know where the boundaries are.”⁴⁸ What if the “boundaries” have been blurred, deconstructed, or even erased? I contend that the IA fails to critique the logic of property and ownership used to ground moral claims (often implicitly) against breaches of cultural trespassing and appropriation. To what extent can groups be considered the owners of cuisine, fashion, or religious practices and rituals? The possession of cultural legacies is precarious and cannot be interpreted according to the logic of ownership on the adoption account. Cultural identifications harvest levels of pride and esteem that make people eager to share their cultures, in the hope that others may appreciate and respect them. Claiming to have a monopoly on one’s cultural pedigree and inheritance is an act of hubris. There may be *prima facie* claims to an appropriation breach but the adoption approach denies it is due to a violation of ownership or property rights. For example, it may be argued outright that it is morally wrong to profit from or commercialize any foreign or minority culture. But such blanket condemnations are rare. Those who cling to cultures so tightly are in danger of being trapped in ways that imprison one’s entire world.

Nguyen and Strohl’s IA note the extremes of this position. Is it the case that only white or gay people can comment on only if they are members of those groups? Do we want to live in a world and have a future in which only Latinos can discuss Latino matters, or Jews are the only ones able to comment on Jewish affairs? Two main problems with the notions of intimacy (IA) involve how they are unable to account for what I call non-intimate encounters, that demand *extended solidarity*. Take the conflict in Ukraine, for example. One need not develop intimacy with a Ukrainian in order to show solidarity with their cause against Russia. Likewise, what is it like to come increasingly in contact with people with whom we do not know or will probably never know and, yet, we are willing to act on each other’s behalf and give testimony and be a witness when called upon to do so? Who can deny the human need for intimacy and personal connections? More examples of intimacy are sought given the level of moral indifference and imperial apathy we all witness. To immerse oneself in the cultural milieu, there is an intensification of feeling articulated by Polish author Joseph Conrad’s *non-intimate*

44) Locke, *Works*, 255.

45) See Jackson, “On the Power of Cultural Adoption.”

46) Locke, “The Contribution of Culture to Race,” 202.

47) Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?*, 53.

48) Nguyen and Strohl, “Cultural Appropriation and Intimacy,” 997.

encounter with a ship examiner “who so unexpectedly had given me an insight into his own existence, awakening in me the sense of the continuity of that sea-life into which I had stepped from outside; giving a touch of human intimacy to the machinery of official relations. *I felt adopted. His experience was for me, too, as though he had been an ancestor.*”⁴⁹

In another recent controversy, Ye (aka Kanye West) posted on Twitter that he was tired, but wanted the world to know that after some rest he was going “Defcon 3 on some Jews.” An avalanche of personal, professional, and cultural backlash ensued. As a way to justify a pattern of antisemitic remarks, Ye claimed that he “cannot be antisemitic since ‘I am Jewish.’ Black people are a part of the real Jews.” Where should I begin to dismantle this level of ignorance by this so-called prophet of pop? First, one cannot use inner-group privilege as a justification for making disparaging veiled threats against members of that group. Just as Jews can discriminate against other Jews, so can women, gays, and other minorities. No such thing as inner-group privilege exists. Second, even if you take Ye’s posts to be unintentionally hurtful, he still works with the logics of assimilation and appropriation – assuming Black people to be a monolith; claiming that membership in a group gives one unfettered freedom to say and demean whoever one does not like: promoting elitist attitudes of ownership which have little to do with the cultural pluralism the performer relentlessly supports, and so forth. Ye is a *cultural abuser*. Instead of being engaged in racial foster care, he practices ethno-racial chauvinism. Locke attacks any effort seeking to articulate allegiance with dogmatic exceptionalisms based on uncritical appeals to authoritative or absolutist values. Such tenors of cultural hubris rely upon “chauvinistic” interpretations of history.

Mass hysteria around Ye’s cultural stances demonstrates how an individual’s racial makeup has little to do with how he or she will view cultural processes and the perceived control any individual can exercise over how those cultures develop and are adopted by others. Further, I argue that Ye’s attitudes reflect a general sentiment within the ethos of “cancel culture” to use cultural caricatures as shields against personal and social criticism. Any unwanted attacks can be defended under the mantle of individual freedom and cultural heritage. Whereas Locke “did point to the efficacy of art and language in place of violence and intolerance,” as means to stay educated and non-impregnated by absolutism, cultural grifters like Ye invert the order and couch their language and art into forms of violence and intolerance. One is driven to imperial apathy after going through stages of grievance-ridden behavior and responses along with seeking redress. What celebrities like Ye fail to consider is how they often conflate cultural value with economic commodification and talk of cultures in the same terms as products for sellers and consumers. Ownership language monopolizes the ways in which Ye interprets the cultural landscape as dominated by an ethno-hegemony of Jewish influence. Anthropological rituals, practices, and symbols are commodified by those who seek either to assimilate or appropriate cultures for abusive purposes. What if Ye and his followers were able to overthrow the so-called Jewish nemesis taking over Hollywood and the hip-hop industry? Is there any reason to expect that a person who consistently refers to himself as “the richest Black man in the world,” would operate any differently from the dark forces he is a victim to? Upon further review, it may be more accurate to conclude that his meltdowns and viral tirades are more a symptom of being envious and driven by a hubristic power-hunger.

It is important to witness how self-righteousness turns into self-serving justifications for one’s own agenda. His example is one of many exhibiting how cultural appropriation, similar to a capitalistic logic of domination, cannot escape unjust encroachment upon cultures. In other words, Ye cannot conceive of cultural exchange without one of the parties being in control and manipulating the process. Can cultural interchange occur outside any fidelity to economic hegemony? No one owns the cultural fidelities one claims to give allegiance to. Since we live in an age that encourages entitlement, it is easy to get the impression that one can

49) Conrad, *Personal Record*, 118; emphasis added.

overcome the contemporary confinements of interaction so prevalent in our social landscape. But what if such entitlements held us back and limited our abilities to interact in the sense of an equal playing field? What if you become so famous, we can no longer look to you as a means to gauge the public agenda or attitude? How will we learn to respect cultures that cannot be domesticated by our supposedly superior techniques and methods of concealed confiscation?

Conclusion

Locke's cultural adoption serves as a healthy antidote to the pervasive forms of sado-populism and nationalism on the rise in our era of grievance politics. Where do people belong today? How can they identify with groups with whom they can *feel* a sense of sponsorship and adoption? Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* in 2005 announced how every culture is being flattened and forced into being put up for adoption. As free agents who act within "transnational flows of capital, trade, commodities, raw materials, and profits,"⁵⁰ we have been pressured into becoming cultural adoptees. In our own ways, we look to cultural historical epochs as the so-called birth parents of contemporary myths, identities, stories, rituals, and heroes. When Karl Jaspers wrote about the Axial Age (*Achsenzeit*), or when Kwasi Wiredu writes his *Philosophy and an African Culture* winning the National Ghana book award in 1962, each was attempting to capture and preserve a "narrative" around origin inheritance. A triad of adoptee, adopter, and progenitor sources embodies a harbinger of cultural heritages constituting the generalized nexus of cultural adoption's basic relationality. Plenty of variables and concerns go into these fostered acquirements and grants us the tasks of reckoning with the past, while negotiating fresh possibilities for the future. As Locke described, the method of value adoption is a process

Only if an object is constantly valued in a particular way that its value adheres to it *and it comes to seem* intrinsically valuable. For it then emancipates itself from the personal valuation and makes its valuation look like a mere recognition of an already existing value. Value acquires objectivity in other ways also. Thus the personal reaction expressed in a value-judgment carries a formal claim to universality, since every one initially regards himself as the measure of all things, until he is instructed by the dissent of others.⁵¹

There are instances of adoption that may be for the purposes of individual autonomy or as a way of seeking self-promotion or to alleviate status anxiety, but these instances are less common as Locke observes. Adoption can work as a power which guarantees a strong showing of independence within entanglements of various kinship groups. In the case of American culture, a prerogative for individual liberty is the pervasive ethos that establishes recognition within the contours of social prestige. As an antidote to cultural assimilation and appropriation, adoption is not a full-scale solution to the problems of asymmetrical violence and the dangers of value absolutism and its offshoots of cultural imperialism. Adoption, like Nguyen and Strohl's IA, does not offer wholesale protection against the various extremes of cultural absolutism and relativism. One can interpret cultures through the dominant lens of selfishness prevalent during our time: populism, nationalism, and libertarianism. It is beyond the scope of this article to ponder how far we have been removed from the possibility of enjoying intimate experiences. Locke failed to appreciate the influence that technology would have in shaping the cultural terrain. Within the technosphere, actors move within the direction of individualism

50) Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, 115.

51) Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*; especially "Value," 123, emphasis added.

and the notion of “connected isolation” as the ultimate foil for continued cultural exchanges and intercourse. Virtual interaction generates feelings of something that is missing or empty, resulting from distant forms of “intimacy.” The give-and-takes of culture for us have become saturated in the techno- and infospheres, respectively. A clear example of new, highly-manufactured performances of culture can be seen with the rise and over reliance on pornography or, what I call the nudification of the world. An age of information technologies and constant surveillance renders the most intimate of human activities naked – the world feels less and less intimate. Nevertheless, Locke sought nothing less than to create a new world “that provided options for individuals and groups – that they would neither be forced to adhere to their historical cultural heritage nor be forced to convert to the cultural motifs of others.”⁵² Given our proclivity to adopt and for self-fashioning, Locke’s philosophy of culture could hardly be more relevant.

52) Dennis, “Relativism and Pluralism of Alain Locke,” 49.

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